



# Political experience and contemporary Brazilian cinema

*Experiência política e cinema brasileiro contemporâneo*



Cíntia Langie<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Film and Audiovisual at the Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel). Doctoral student of the Graduate Program in Education at UFPel. E-mail: [cintialangie@gmail.com](mailto:cintialangie@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This study relates the notion of *politics* to a specific cultural experience: Brazilian films screening in universities. We investigated the processes of subjectivation enabled by the encounter with independent works of art, which lack circulation in traditional screens. In this frame of mind, a political experience may occur in the being-along with the common shareable object that is the film. Thus, we propose that current projects that desecrate devices may form sharing micro-communities, as well as hegemonic capitalistic models.

**Keywords:** political experience; Brazilian cinema; processes of subjectivation.

**Resumo:** Este texto objetiva agenciar a noção de *política* a um tipo específico de experiência cultural: as sessões de cinema brasileiro em universidades. Buscamos investigar os processos de subjetivação possíveis no encontro com obras de arte independentes, aquelas que não possuem espaço de circulação nas janelas tradicionais. Nessa trama de pensamento, uma experiência política pode ocorrer no estar-junto com o comum compartilhável que é o filme. Assim, propomos que projetos que profanam dispositivos na atualidade podem formar microcomunidades de partilha, para além de modelos capitalísticos hegemônicos.

**Palavras-chave:** experiência política; cinema brasileiro; processos de subjetivação.

## Prelude

We are in a university building, where a movie theater structure has been built with curtain-covered windows, comfortable chairs, a powerful stereo, and a white cloth hung on the wall. A desk with a notebook and a projector is located in the center. A commented film screening is about to start. The film to be shown is *Boy 23* (2016), a Brazilian documentary by Belisário Franca that depicts traces of Nazism found in the countryside. The work portrays the story of orphaned black boys who are victims of a criminal eugenic project in the 1920s and 1930s, which somehow enslaved these boys, who were numbered – explaining the title. Its driving force is a survivor’s testimony: the boy 23.

The screening starts. That story, which occurred years ago in Brazil, enables us to think of the present moment and the continuous violence perpetrated by power holders against people. Beyond that, it enables us to think of latent racism in society. Artistic gestures, poetic scenes, unknown voices, sensation blocks, silent faces... voids that provide introspection.

After the screening, the debate begins. Two women were invited to comment on the film: a young student who runs a film club on black cinema at that same institution, and an Art black female professor, advocate of Afro-descendant community issues. After the debate, a girl from the audience, also black, reported that the film touched her deeply, as her mother, also black, was once a domestic worker exploited by her bosses, who dismissed her without giving what was rightfully hers. The professor took the floor to reiterate the importance of that moment, the film, the screening. According to her, it is by encountering something that “pushes us” that our mindset destabilizes. “We must be pushed to do something, what moves us. This film pushes me. And it could push a lot of people,” she added.

On that day, the academic space was filled with multiple types and styles, forming a mixed audience. Due to the event disclosure, many people interested in racial issues – from inside and outside the university community – were present, forming a cluster. Such cluster had common interests but different viewpoints and backgrounds: whites, blacks, students, professors, community people. The film, as a common object to all present, the conversation, and the opportunity to express ideas once screening ended foster the possibility of opening horizons in the interaction among differences.

By giving prominence to afrodescendant populations, *Boy 23* reveals social fissures, offering a new distribution of the sensible (RANCIÈRE, 2009). According to the student debater, blacks usually play supporting roles in cinema, as employees and subordinates. The screening of films that provide other functions to those share-less in society and that place excluded as protagonists is an effort to bridge the gap between those who share common spaces.

We believe that political experiences may arise from peculiar encounters with works of art in micropolitical situations, which push the mindset by the encounter with difference (GUATTARI, 2011). By holding film clubs, exhibitions, or commented film screening, the university offers subjective processes different from those of encounters in the hegemonic capitalist model. Such opportunities impose another code, form a sharing community, and circulate another circuit of affections (SAFATLE, 2016), which can transform the Brazilian cinema itself.

#### Four perspectives around the notion of politics

Another language, another way of making cinema, video, politics correspond to the real possibility of doing something else; something free from the usual labels, which has nothing to do with doing something more primitive. Open possibilities are endless, even at the political level. (GUATTARI, 2011, p. 334, our translation)

This study approaches the concept of *politics* not to deplete its multiple facets, but to stipulate a mindset that conveys relevance to this debate that, although sometimes seems worn out, is urged by our historical present. For this debate, political component concerns living along, creating possibilities in a given community, and making some difference in the space and time in which we live. Our case entails a specific being-along around something common: the contemporary Brazilian cinema. In this sense, we sought to investigate subjective processes and political experiences enabled by the cinema.

To execute such frame of mind, four different theoretical perspectives on politics are presented throughout this article: Rancière (1996, 2009, 2012), Agamben (2009), Barbalho (2016), and Guattari (1992, 2011). This set of forces helps us understand the theme within its complexity by looking at the object of

analysis from different perspectives and viewpoints, so that we may mitigate the risk of reductionism or generalizations.

To bring this study to life, that is, to bring us closer to daily life, seeking a pulsating research rather than simply theoretical, we aim to associate studies on the notion of politics with the fields of Art and Education from a specific type of cultural experience: commented screenings of Brazilian films in public universities.

By doing that, we aim to investigate some potentialities in these diffusion spaces of Brazilian non-commercial cinema regarding knowledge production and processes of subjectivation – experiences that make us who we are. Our research proposes the following question: how can education in public universities provide political experiences in these dark times using audiovisual art? If differentiation and singularization processes are possible when the production of subjectivity is *sui generis* (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2010), we wonder: what happens in these Brazilian film screenings that can foster processes at the creation level?

As for the theoretical framework of our debate, the first tool stems from the ideas of the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1996) for differentiating the terms police and politics. His theorizations are also important regarding the association between political perspective and the sensible and artistic practices (RANCIÈRE, 2009). Then we expatiate on the writings of Giorgio Agamben (2009) on device, to understand how cinema may function as political force in the social field. The Brazilian researcher Alexandre Barbalho (2016) will also help us understand the concept of cultural politics and the problems of art diffusion in contemporary times.

After that, we will analyze the subjectivation processes with cinema according to Félix Guattari (2011), because our work addresses the perspective of the micro – a smaller, sensible politics that occurs between things and beings, affections and losses, what we can identify and what we cannot even imagine, but that traverses us. The thought enables us to board a flight in what is power, virtual in life, as singularization and differentiation processes in micropolitical events that address more what happens in the body than in the traditional and institutional political spheres.

### **A new distribution blooms at the university**

Each society engenders a standard way of being in the world, a dominant subjectivation mode that is completely associated with politics. We employ *politics* as the balance of power that (re)produces certain ways of existence, that

is, the sphere that determines social roles to be played according to certain social expectations at certain times. Rancière (2009) calls it *distribution of the sensible*: the aesthetic constitution that shapes the community, the mean by which the relationship between a common that is shared and exclusive parts that are divided is determined in the sensible. “I call it the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (RANCIÈRE, 2009, p. 11, our translation).

In the basis of politics, there is an aesthetic. Such aesthetic determines roles division and each party form and function within the community. Thus, the common space only exists as share, a common in which a few have their *share* while most are *share-less* (RANCIÈRE, 2009). Share-less are those with few margins of action in a given community. According to Migliorin and Lima (2017, p. 219, our translation):

Politics somehow concerns the displacement of assigned places and the disturbance in share distributions by sensibly affirming subjects who would be excluded in the public debate, because they would be destined to identities established by the police organization.

In *Disagreement* (1996), Rancière distinguishes the concepts of police and politics. *Police* reflects the broad force acting upon the sensible to control it, containing the given share and sustaining the established divisions. It denotes a police-like way of acting. In turn, *politics* occurs when something disrupts the given configuration, breaks with the established, enabling a new share of the sensible. Rancière hollows the common sense attached to the word politics to show that only those activities that offer some share to the share-less, respecting principles of equality to build democratic communities, indeed entail politics.

This broadens the concept of politics for inducing us to think of it as a situation of equality. Politics, thus, only exists “when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a share of those share-less” (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p. 26, our translation). Political acts are those that foment dissensus, ruptures that actually configure new, more democratic, and egalitarian shares.

Showing in another way what was not easily seen, correlating what was not correlated, to provoke ruptures in the sensible tissue of perceptions and in the dynamics of affections. That is

the work of fiction. Fiction is not the creation of an imaginary world that is opposite to the real world. It is the work that operates dissensus. (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p.64, our translation)

Therefore, disaccustoming the world of conventions – which pertain to the the order of consensus – would also entail a political act. That introduces the most powerful relations between art and politics. If nowadays we still experience the spectacle generalization (what Debord announced in 1967), then the real battle of power discourses is established within the aesthetic field (RANCIÈRE, 2009, p. 12). For Rancière, the term *aesthetics* denotes “a mode of articulation between ways of doing, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships” (RANCIÈRE, 2009, p. 13, our translation). Thus, combining aesthetic and political practices could provoke fissures or provide new distributions of the sensible.

Now we shall expatiate, more specifically, on the diffusion of Brazilian cinema in our contemporaneity. Data from the Brazilian Film Agency (ANCINE) for the first half of 2016 shows that 87% of tickets sold in commercial theaters in Brazil correspond to foreign films, whereas only 13% of the audience watch national films (ANCINE, 2017). As one of the greatest thinkers of our cinema used to say by the middle of the last century, for a film to be considered good in Brazil, it must be foreign: “The Brazilian public widely adopted the heroes, themes, feelings, and landscapes of imported films” (GOMES, 2016, p. 62, our translation). We may claim that the colonial condition lingers until nowadays regarding films consumption.

According to ANCINE (2017), Brazilian independent film production has grown considerably, with approximately 200 feature films yearly. Such production is multiple and plural: films are produced in all country regions, with varied genres and themes. However, these works lack screens to circulate, and they are often disclosed by alternative projects. These films often portray daily life stories, conflicts of infamous characters from various countryside cities – sociocultural themes unexplored by the mass media. For the spectator who experiences encountering this content, they would represent a possibility of openness to the common unknown. Disseminating this type of cinema conveys certain urgency, particularly in the current Brazilian society where intolerance has almost utterly annihilated the common territory possibility of being populated by differences (ROLNIK, 2018).

Film screening initiatives within universities have been growing in the country. Besides university rooms,<sup>2</sup> many film clubs and extension projects aim to display contemporary Brazilian cinematography. Nonprofit spaces for cinematographic art fruition seek to provide visibility to films without a share in traditional screens (usually overtaken by Hollywood content). By doing that, they may distribute the common in a different way, destabilizing the established distribution and conventional patterns, even if in restricted spaces, even if symbolically.

We realize that nowadays the university is still elitist – either because of the difficult access to higher education courses or because low-income audience does not feel that they belong within this space. However, we understand such film screenings as a possibility, and universities are with open doors to the overall community. Many screening spaces in universities conduct projects on Brazilian film for schools in peripheral areas, which raises the possibility for young people and adolescents to attend cultural spaces and experience repertoires different from those they are used to.

These screening sessions are held in many other places, suitable or not for an excellent display, such as adapted rooms in public schools, gymnasiums, and even outdoors in peripheral areas. However, our study is concerned with initiatives implemented in public universities for believing in its potential (with its structure and human material) to grant broader access to the national film culture, and due to the current government latent persecution to federal educational institutions.

### **Desecrating devices by a cultural politics**

Giorgio Agamben (2009) states that a device not only has a strategic nature, but also functions as a manipulation of forces relations. He seems to propose the problematization of the contemporary political sphere and subjectivation processes. Allegedly a Foucault's tributary, Agamben stems from Foucault's work and adds some displacements to discuss devices as fundamental mechanisms for understanding politics. The author seeks to understand the processes of subjectivation of our time from the tension/relationship between living beings and devices. In other words, the modes of subjectivation engendered by contemporary devices, among them cinema (2009).

<sup>2</sup> The project *Cinemas em Rede*, of the National Education and Research Network (RNP), comprises 10 university movie theaters throughout the country, including Cine Arte UFF in Niterói, Cinusp in São Paulo, Sala Redenção in Porto Alegre, Cine Metrópoles in Vitória, and Cine Vila Rica in Ouro Preto.



According to Agamben, device is “anything that has somehow the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 40). Everything that interacts with living beings, that shapes them, is considered a device – nowadays, there is not a single moment in life in which devices are not interacting with beings.

In seeking the genealogy of the term, Agamben (2009) shows that Foucault originally defined device as *positivity*, that is, a set of rules and rituals, imposed on individuals by an external power, that are internalized, socially naturalized. Thus, we understand cinema as a social device with a set of rules strictly established by those who hold power: filmmakers. The audience naturalizes the cinematic “form” and absorb the work without considering the way in which it was produced, without acknowledging its mechanism.

The film appears before the public as a shelf-ready merchandise, a spectacle. This entails a “government” relation, as the mechanism governs others, and “devices must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject” (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 38, our translation). In the more traditional, commercial cinema, the device often aims to direct the thought of those watching, to draw their attention using almost pedagogical strategies and repetitive and self-explanatory stories.

Agamben’s criticism (2009) strives for demonstrating that current devices do not form subjects, but reproduce models; that is, they are associated to processes of “dissubjectivation.” There lies its correlation with the political question, since for him “contemporary societies present themselves as inert bodies traversed by huge processes of disubjectivation that are not related to any real subjectivation” (2009, p. 48). Living beings, shaped by devices, are imprisoned by the current system, which makes them docile and fragile by increasingly shoving them away from political action and community participation.

Agamben (2009) defines desecration as the ability to provide another use, resignify, subvert devices for making them public, common to the community. In this sense, writing, filming, or promoting film screenings may also be considered a desecrated task when modifying the standard uses of technologies, modifying life as it is. For Agamben, this would constitute a political action for offering a different use of mechanisms, a different use of the world.

According to the author, media devices neutralize the desecrated power of language for being limited to common sense. Desecration is the attempt to use devices, including audiovisual, in a different way, which may be a political task. A traditional movie theater is regulated by strict market rules, mostly displaying blockbuster films from Hollywood, with vigorous distribution, seeking the greatest possible profit. Thus, considering other curatorial policies would not imply desecrating the movie theater device? Shedding light on and giving voice to artistic works that lack spaces in traditional screen could not be considered a political act?

Such diffusion initiatives stand out not only due to curatorship, but also by their experimental nature. Initiatives with greater creative freedom and flexibility may be developed within these places, aiming no profit-making and expecting no direct results. The university “is a privileged place within a world where everything seems subject to market interests or electoral logics” (MIGLIORIN, 2015, p. 30). Those film distribution projects often are or began as extension projects – initiatives that seek to place the university and everything attached to it at the service of community. Wouldn’t that be a way of desecrating the academy itself?

Such “alternative” diffusion spaces also offer the community the possibility of participating in the decisions of what to display. Not only students have the autonomy to organize exhibitions and film clubs, but also spectators can propose and suggest content, as curatorship tends to be more open and participatory. As most of these projects are possible due to students work, they are considered academic laboratories, bringing young people together to acquire new knowledge. Likewise, the free use of the university space, which allows spectators to enter without paying for tickets, remaining in the room while it is open, and querying present directors, represents an almost desecrated use of an exhibition room. All of that makes us ponder on the current role of education in enabling spaces of encounters, communion of knowledge, and desires.

This may lead us to define desecration as finding another use for things in society. In his book *Cultural politics and disagreement*, the Brazilian researcher Alexandre Barbalho (2016) discusses other models for culture besides merchandise and consumption or social inclusion. “Culture has been hegemonically placed in the contemporary world based on economic and social paradigms, or rather, income generation and social inclusion” (BARBALHO, 2016, p. 8, our translation).

How to think of cultural policies today, he wonders, without falling into dominant *clichés*? According to Barbalho, culture should not serve the interests of the market, nor focus on salvationism to govern people who supposedly pose a “risk” to society. Cultural politics as a public politics, concludes him, should stem from a set of social and political agreements on goals and needs that it must meet. That is, it must be capable of promoting expressions that are not strong enough to exist without state actions, such as Brazilian independent cinema.

Based on Rancière, I would say that the role of cultural politics in the logic of disagreement is to resume cultural manifestations that occur in the multiple *socius* settings without being held hostage to the ‘purified politics’, where there is little politics and much disenchantment. (BARBALHO, 2016, p. 79, our translation)

Considering that, cultural politics is only possible when movements unattached to the interests of the market (those on the margins, the *share-less*) destabilize the distribution of what is common, what pertains to each party. That happens because the film market is currently dominated by business conglomerates, embraced by the neoliberalism, which guarantees the concentration of production and circulation for few companies, promoting a standardized subjectivation and a consumption desire.

Politics “precisely ruptures the sensible configuration that defines their shares and absences by raising the issue of the share-less share” (BARBALHO, 2016, p. 86, our translation). Following this frame of mind, we may understand Brazilian films screenings in universities as cultural policies, as such spaces tend to displace some conventional aesthetic and political standards by highlighting artistic manifestations that are not always seen and guiding discussions that did not exist before.

As these events surpass screening by conducting activities around the film, such as debates, thematic exhibitions, and sessions for specific audiences, they enable the establishment of a community, even if punctual and temporary. Besides temporary, those micro-communities are also mutants; that is, different tribes frequent the space depending on the exhibition and the film style. Regardless of the so-called *habitués*, these projects are not limited to restricted groups, as they embrace a plurality of film, for varied tastes, and at no charge. The opportunity for

sensible exchanges, not only with the common object (the film), but with other people, may enhance the experience.

If all relationships occur between living beings and devices, as stated by Agamben (2009), and if devices always engender processes of subjectivation, we may think of these university spaces of cinema diffusion as environments of affection, as devices that transform the Brazilian cinema itself, which is presented to the spectator in a valorized way, as something relevant, producing individuals more open to the national cinema. By providing space for national films that often lack circulation space, curatorship politics not only acts as cultural policies (BARBALHO), but also enables the creation of more educational and emancipatory processes.

### **Processes of subjectivation with Brazilian films**

For Guattari (1992), subjectivation is a continuous process resulting from encounters with the other, which can be regarded as social, nature, people, inventions, works of art – what is inserted within the social context and produces effects on us. These relationships are increasingly broadening with technologies, especially digital technologies. The audiovisual that circulate in the various exhibition screens and reaches us, also shapes and somehow subjectivates us. Likewise, our surrounding moves us, enabling us to realize things we are unaware of and that say about us, constituting us as beings who belong to a community – a very dear issue to the education field.

Subjectivity production machines vary. “In the capitalistic system, production is industrial and occurs on an international scale” (GUATTARI, 2011, p. 33). That implies a capitalistic mode of production of subjectivity that tends to level people according to major reductive categories; that is, a collective ethics, a way of live, a lifestyle suggested by images surrounding us, which dictates the current social relations models. For Guattari (2011), the media is an attempt to domesticate opinion.

Generally speaking, the psychoanalyst locates the way out of this capitalistic subjectivity in singularization processes, in specific situations, minor and micropolitic experiences. “I am calling singularization processes those that frustrate these capitalistic values internalization mechanisms” (GUATTARI, 2011, p. 55, our translation). Yet, Guattari (2001) warns that it is not always possible to unleash processes that engender singular subjectivities, nor separate capitalistic subjectivation

processes from singular in a crystallized way: they coexist. Singularities may arise from smaller situations, escapes, leaks from hegemonic models. In that case, it would correspond to the order of the event, of the encounter, so that it is impossible to prescribe or evaluate such processes. However, it is possible to share processes of this nature by recognizing *sui generis* experiences.

### Final remarks

How to offer, nowadays, a political experience with Brazilian cinema beyond what we have been conditioned since childhood? If processes of subjectivation are those from which we become who we are, and politics deals with the balance of power that we socially and individually form in spaces we attend, then a political experience comprises the balance of power that forms a sensible within us, within what we are and constantly become.

That explains why we advocate a being-along in contemporaneity, a call for political and relational spaces to be solidified and maximized, especially within educational institutions. Places that not only circulate people and knowledge, but that also enable experiences. We say experience as a *sui generis* situation, moments of rupture, events that erupt with hegemonic logic.

As experimental and participatory projects, diffusion spaces of Brazilian cinema in the university approach the notion of politics in two distinct ways: by curatorship, and by creating its own operating rules, more autonomous and participatory. These proposals make room to Brazilian independent films, which portray characters and realities poorly addressed by other media channels. In doing that, they displace certainties and transform social positions at the moment of screening.

Such initiatives also constitute political actions of new distributions for providing space to space-less films, functioning as a circuit that reduces the distance between the Brazilian public and the cinema produced in all country regions. Granting access to audiovisual culture by maintaining contemporary national films as a valuable item within people reach in an affective circle may transform cinema itself. The community that participates in these projects – spectators and workers – is overwhelmed by the tender affections of these encounters, which convey relevance for the university space functioning as a circuit for the independent share-less Brazilian cinema.

Collective fruition has a particular thrust to create small experience-sharing communities, even if punctual and temporary and within restricted spaces, such as the university. Outlining such initiatives does not mean to say they are essential or the way out of the issue of access to art and culture. However, we do believe that by shedding some light to this type of projects we are sharing possibilities and stimulating the development of new projects in different places, publicly and freely.

If the term community refers to what connects us to others by a common trait, expanding the possibilities with cinema and providing a community with what is different, using scenes and stories that deeply portray what is unavailable in the media, could make that given community more open and plural, following the complexity of our time.

## References

- AGAMBEN, G. *O que é o contemporâneo e outros ensaios*. Chapecó: Argos, 2009.
- ANCINE. *Distribuição em salas de exibição: informe anual 2016*. Brasília, DF: Observatório brasileiro do Cinema Audiovisual, 2017. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3bBNpfp>. Access on: May 15, 2020.
- BARBALHO, A. *Política cultural e desentendimento*. Fortaleza: IBDCult, 2016.
- DELEUZE, G.; GUATTARI, F. *O que é a filosofia?* São Paulo: Editora 34, 2010.
- GOMES, P. E. S. *Uma situação colonial?* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.
- GUATTARI, F. *Caosmose: um novo paradigma estético*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 1992.
- GUATTARI, F.; ROLNIK, S. *Micropolítica: cartografias do desejo*. Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 2011.
- MIGLIORIN, C. *Inevitavelmente cinema: educação, política e mafuá*. Rio de Janeiro: Beco do Azogue, 2015.
- MIGLIORIN, C.; LIMA, É. A. Estética e comunidade: ocupar o inacabado. In: *O que nos faz pensar*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 26, n. 40, p. 203-221, 2017.
- RANCIÈRE, J. *O desentendimento*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 1996.
- RANCIÈRE, J. *A partilha do sensível: estética e política*. São Paulo: EXO experimental; Editora 34, 2009.

ROLNIK, S. *Esferas da insurreição*: notas para uma vida não cafetinada. São Paulo: N-1, 2018.

SAFATLE, V. *O circuito dos afetos*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2016.

#### **Audiovisual references**

MENINO 23. Belisário Franca, Brasil, 2016.

Submitted: July 13, 2019 | Approved: Apr. 2, 2020